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It's all about **tunes** for our yuletide pleasure

Christmas is coming and people are looking for ways to spend money. Every year, crafty record companies make it easy for us, issuing piles of greatest hits compilations and box sets that make for quick-fix gifts and stocking stuffers for shoppers and audiophiles of all stripes. While the original artistic vision may get lost in the packaging process, the songs are there; and in this iTunes era, it's all about the songs. To help you navigate the deluge, The Gazette's music writers offer a run-down of some of this season's music compilations.

T'CHA DUNLEVY

K Maro

Platinum Remixes
K Pone Inc./Warner

After achieving modest success here with his band LMDS, 25-year-old Lebanese-Québécois artist K Maro shot to stardom in Europe with his 2004 solo debut La Good Life. His flashy French take on American gangsta rap and R&B made him a hit in France, and the fever spread to neighbouring countries. Last year's follow-up Million Dollar Boy kept his name on the charts, and this collection of remixes should do the same. Nothing shockingly new. His sound remains full of polish and clubland bump. K Maro makes a mint by keeping his shtick slick. While offering little substance, this collection has its audience in the palm of its hand. ★★★

T'CHA DUNLEVY

Boney M

The Magic of Boney M
Sony BMG

With its glitter-covered costumes and roller-ready dance songs, European party collective Boney M mixed disco's campy, kitsch and flamboyance with occasional Caribbean influences. The 70s group was the brainchild of German producer Frank Farian, who would later create the ill-fated pop duo Milli Vanilli. Boney M's bright-eyed covers of reggae hits Rivers of Babylon and No Woman No Cry are quite entertaining. The giddy, island-inflected Hooray! Hooray! It's a Holi-Holiday offers timely season's greetings, as does their cover of the calypso classic Mary's Boy Child/Oh My Lord. And their smash single Brown Girl in the Ring still holds up as a great little song. Silly, but surprisingly fun. ★★★½

T'CHA DUNLEVY

Tori Amos

A Piano: The Collection
Rhino/Warner

Simultaneously vulnerable and lion-hearted, Little Earthquakes was a six-star album if ever there was one. Amos knows her strengths, dedicating a full disc of her five-CD retrospective to the 1992 confessional (presented with alternate mixes and B-sides). Later work often sacrifices lucidity for hippity-boppity-boo ciphers, but even self-consciously quirky moments play into Amos's fascinating duality – part aloof enigma, part open-heart surgeon. The chronology gets tangled by Disc 3, and the inimitable Spanders-rock blunder Y Kant Tori Read – foreverair brushed from history – isn't the only omission (why ignore 2001's provocative covers album Strange Little Girls?). But what's here is momentous, although obsessives will be underwhelmed by the scant amount of previously unreleased material (best of the bunch: the evil-sounding Zero Point). Fans who haven't kept pace with Amos's many singles will find their wallets' worth in the B-sides disc (admittedly only scratching the surface of her rarities). ★★★★

JORDAN ZIVITZ

Our Lady Peace

A Decade
Columbia/Sony BMG

Twelve years, actually, but who's counting? The Torontonians saved the best of the "decade" for first and last: The Birdman's wasp-sting guitar and Starseed's super-sized shamanism (both from 1994's Naveed) remain stunningly potent, while the three tracks included from last year's underrated Healthy in Paranoid Times are arena rockers with brains and soul. The days in between weren't too shabby, either, despite a few wobbly steps toward the mall-rat crowd. Lyricist/singer Raine Maida's grip on teen alienation has more often been iron-fisted (Clumsy, Naveed) than limp-wristed (the embarrassingly simplistic Life), and even the few clunkers here have a heart: This has always been a band intent on understanding and connecting with its audience. Two new songs point to moodier days ahead. ★★★½

JORDAN ZIVITZ

Oasis

Stop the Clocks
Columbia/Sony BMG

A blue-collar thug with a shot of Johnny Rotten in his snout, a songwriter with a great sense of song as event – the Eyebrows That Walk Like Men brought a rock anti-revolution. Where Kurt Cobain was one of high-school's vicious who sparked a rock'n'roll underclass revolt, Oasis were the bullies retaking control. Oasis didn't invent anything – not even copying the Beatles – and the U.K.'s desperate overhype was more a reaction to the lost decade preceding them. Still, there were bewura moments ... although this collection is missing three (Stay Young, Roll With It, Hey Now), made-even more criminal given they managed to cram a whole nine songs on each of two discs. Alternative title: Now That's What I Call Quite Good. ★★★★

MARK LEPAGE

Dave Matthews Band

The Best of What's Around Vol. 1
Bama/Rags/Sony BMG

One disc of studio and one live – guess which one ranks higher in this precinct? When his bouncy groove band went melodic – when DMB peeled off his street clothes and became Super Dave – he lost one or two old fans but gained ... a few friendly critics. Take American Baby – not nation-allsun, but a plea for his hacky-sack nation to find the good in itself again. Take The Space Between, a tight power ballad from the left of the heartland. And I'll take another listen to the live side, especially the tough Don't Drink the Water. ★★★½

MARK LEPAGE

The Byrds

There is a Season
Columbia/ Legacy

If you're a student of popular music history who doesn't have every Byrds album, hide your head in shame. Then start making amends by seeking out this career-spanning overview of one of rock's most innovative and influential groups. Just one track shy of 100, this four-CD-plus-DVD collection is a serious improvement on the 1990 box set, with a few selections dropped, some alternate versions substituted and many songs added. Dramatic insights will come to the initiate, including the revelation that later incarnations of Roger McGuinn's band were but instrumentalists, unfairly dismissed in the wake of the classic original lineup. Try to imagine rock's musical landscape without the jaw-dropping accomplishments of McGuinn and his revolving-door geniuses, who aggressively integrated folk, country, jazz, ragas and sci-fi into rock's vocabulary within a few years. Unlike the music, the 36-minute DVD of early television appearances is amusing, but dated. ★★★★★

BERNARD PERUSSE

Jerry Garcia

The Very Best of Jerry Garcia
Rhino

The grinning, chuckling, conspiratorial heart and soul of the Grateful Dead managed to keep an impressive – if not always consistent – solo career going, even when the band was thriving. Some of the stronger moments from his side projects are collected on this two-disc set – one studio and one live, with each clocking in at more than 78 minutes. A few tracks, particularly live marathons like Knockin' on Heaven's Door, border on tedious, but there's joyous discovery to be had in buried treasures like Cats Under the Stars. And while Garcia's thin, reedy voice can be an acquired taste, his sweet, lyrical guitar playing is tough to OD on. Detractors of the Dead need not apply, but everyone else is clearly welcome to the love-in. ★★★½

BERNARD PERUSSE

Tim Buckley

The Best of Tim Buckley
Elektra/ Rhino

How tragic that such an inspired singer-songwriter is so often a footnote: father of the equally doomed Jeff. He was, in part, the author of his own obscurity, as one can easily tell by the last two tracks here, which represent a sad decline at the end of his career. But when Tim Buckley was on, he played a gripping brand of theatrical folk-rock, which soon evolved into open-ended acoustic jazz that shared an edge-of-the-night abandon with Fred Neil and Astral Weeks-era Van Morrison. This well-chosen collection covers Buckley's output between his debut album in 1966 and his final recordings in 1974 – the year before he died of an overdose. Consider this music a great place to get lost. ★★★★½

BERNARD PERUSSE

Billy Bragg

Volume 1 and Volume 2
Outside Music

The Bard of Barking gets the retrospective treatment in two boxed sets chronicling Bragg's evolution from raw troubadour to polished performer. Volume 1 contains Bragg's first four albums, three discs of rarities and a DVD of the singer in concert in pre-glasnost East Germany, Lithuania and Ronald Reagan's favorite Central America playground, Nicaragua. With Volume 2, Bragg morphs from solitary Billy Bloke with a roughly strummed electric guitar to full band and fuller pop sound. There are eight discs, including demos and alternate takes. The topper is a DVD featuring a BBC concert by Bragg and the Red Stars in 1991 and a 2006 performance filmed in Bragg's hometown

of Barking. Volume 1 will be a walk down memory lane for anyone who has black stovepipe jeans and a pair of Docs lurking in the back of the closet. Bragg, sometimes called the "one-man Clash" flailed at his guitar, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan with unabashed gusto, singing his pointed lyrics in an everyman honk. Originals A New England, The Milkman of Human Kindness, A Lover Sings, St. Swithin's Day and folk and R&B covers tumble forth in the first box. With the second volume, the sound is fuller but the pickings a little slimmer as a maturing Bragg reconciles politics and personal relations. The result is Sexuality, an unlikely sadsex dance hit, but otherwise few anthemic gems. Obsessives will fret over the omissions – where's Walk Away Renee? Regular fans will glory in the remastering and bonus material. ★★★★

MARY LAMEY

Johnny Cash

The Legend of Johnny Cash
Vol. II
Hip-O/Universal

This second volume in Johnny Cash's legend series continues to draw material from throughout the career of the man regarded by many as the greatest country singer of all time. There are a few songs, including Ballad of a Teenage Queen, from his early years at Sun Records. There's a bunch of tracks, including such gems as I Still Miss Someone and Flesh and Blood, from his glory years at Columbia, a couple from his Mercury years and some highlights from his revital-

ised final period at American. Cash's duet with Bob Dylan on Girl from the North Country, from Dylan's Nashville Skyline, sounds great in this remastering. Given the depth of Cash's catalogue, this formula will be good for an endless series of releases. ★★★★½

MIKE REGENSTREIF

Various Artists

Sugar Hill Records:
A Retrospective
Sugar Hill/Fusion III

Since its founding in 1978, Sugar Hill has been one of the primary independent labels in roots music. This four-CD box set offers up 81 highlights from their its 25 years. Bluegrass has always been a Sugar Hill mainstay and the set includes such stalwarts of the genre as Hot Rize, Del McCoury and the Nashville Bluegrass Band, as well as Dolly Parton in her recent bluegrass incarnation. There's country music from the likes of Ricky Skaggs and Chris Hillman and great songwriters including Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark and legendary ex-Montrealer Jesse Winchester. There are some terrific tracks from blues legend Clarence (Gatemouth) Brown, the Bel Clay Ramblers and Doc Watson. Curiously missing, though, is folk legend Tom Paxton, who recorded a couple of fine albums on Sugar Hill in the 1980s. The box also includes a DVD with some music videos and interviews with some of the artists speaking about the importance of the label. ★★★★½

MIKE REGENSTREIF

Miles Davis Quintet

The Legendary Prestige Quintet Sessions
Prestige

Davis had several golden periods but none so storied as the music herein. Background: In 1955, the trumpeter returned from heroin addiction with a Newport Jazz fest set so sensational that leading label Columbia came running. Indie Prestige agreed to let him go, so long as he honoured his contract for five more albums. Much of this was waxed in three marathon sessions, where first-takes ruled, and released willy-nilly on four albums, Relaxin', Workin', Cookin' and Steamin'. This four-CD collection offers the music in the order in which it was recorded: we hear the evolution of saxophonist John Coltrane, from hesitant to free flowing, and Davis's first long excursions using a mute for the cool sound he virtually trademarked. The rhythm section (Red Garland, Philly Joe Jones, Paul Chambers) provides a lesson in smooth swing. The final disc offers club recordings, leading up to his 1959 classic Kind of Blue. An indispensable slice of jazz history. ★★★★★

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Georges Brassens

Les 100 Plus Belles Chansons
Universal

Brassens was the quiet man among immortal French singer-poets, and a flood of new books and re-issues commemorate his death from cancer 25 years ago, a week after his 60th birthday. He was never at ease as a performer – he agonized over choosing the stage over the page – and his shyness could verge on schtick. His music – gentle loping finger-picking on guitar – had neither Gainsbourg's pizzazz nor Ferré's drama, yet it has a trance-like effect supporting his singular lyricism. Brassens' extreme tenderness of heart matches his powers of observation, from slices of life to anthems. The supreme re-mastering job over five discs (beginning in 1953) gets the listener "inside" the timbres of his mind. Hang on every word, or turn it down low for perfect poetic mood musique: this collection is a fine introduction to the power of classic French chanson. ★★★★½

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

briefly noted

★★★½ Charles Aznavour: Her Encore (EMI). Of the many greatest-hits packages on the 83-year-old legend (La Bohème), choose this two-CD set (including duets with Piaf, Sinatra, Soulay) because of the disc devoted to concert recordings at L'Olympia in Paris. ■

★★★★ Nickel Creek: Reasons Why (The Very Best) (Sugar Hill/Fusion III). They began as teenaged bluegrass prodigies and later experimented with genre-bending acoustic music. This 16-song compilation represents the recently broken-up band at their best. ■

★★★★ Primus: They Can't All Be Zingers (Interscope/ Universal). A career-spanning selection of gonzo favourites that sound like no other band on Earth – or Mars. Love the extremely honest Kraft Singles-style wrapper ("Repackaged for ... our financial benefit"). ■

★★★ Boz Scaggs: Hits! (Columbia/ Legacy). Scaggs's glaze dancefloor soul shuffles, which helped define the white-suited '70s, rarely got shirt-soaking hot. But this reissued set – with five tracks added to the original 10 – proves that a reliable, friendly groove can live comfortably beside the possessed inspiration of real visionaries. ■

★★ Staind: 1996-2006 The Singles (Flip/WEA). "Inside you're ugly/Ugly like me." Cobain's self-loathing went to metal group therapy here, and came out with slick touch-yr-feelings power ballads. One probably shouldn't have much against Staind, but by the same token, hard to have much for them or their era. MARK LEPAGE

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